

# What is the Proper Role of Reason?

## 1. Reason Necessary for the Reception of Revelation:

a. Believers do not reject necessarily of reason in all things related to religion; b. Reason is necessarily presupposed in every revelation.

"Revelation is the communication of the truth to the mind. But the communication of truth supposes the capacity to receive it. Revelations cannot be made to brutes or to idiots. Truths, to be received as objects of faith, must be intellectually apprehended. A proposition, to which we attach no meaning, however important, to which it may contain, cannot be an object of faith. If it be affirmed that the soul is immortal, or God is a spirit, unless we know the meanings of the words is nothing is communicated to the mind, and the mind can affirm or deny nothing on the subject. In other words, knowledge is essential to faith. In believing we affirm the truth of the proposition believed. But we can affirm nothing of that which we know nothing. The first and indispensable office of reason, therefore, in matters of faith, is the cognition, or intelligent apprehension of the truths proposed for our reception" [1:49].

## 2. Difference between knowing & understanding:

"A child knows what the words 'God is a spirit' mean. No creating being can comprehend the Almighty unto perfection. We must know the plan of salvation; but no one can comprehend its mysteries. This distinction is recognized in every department. Men know unthinkably more than they understand. We know that plants grow; that the will controls our voluntary muscles; that Jesus Christ is God and man in two distinct natures, and one person forever; but here as everywhere we are surrounded by the incomprehensible. We can rationally believe that a thing is, without knowing how or why it is. It is enough for the true dignity of man as a rational creature, that he is not called upon by His creator to believe without knowledge, to receive as true propositions which convey no meaning to the mind. This would not be only irrational, but impossible" [1:51].

## 3. What is impossible is for God to violate First Principles of Logic.

## 4. Proofs of this Prerogative of Reason.

a. Since faith includes an affirmation the mind that a thing is true, it would be a contradiction to say that the mind can affirm that to be true which it sees it cannot be possibly be true. b. From the very constitution of our nature, we are forbidden to believe the impossible. c. "We are required to pronounce anathema upon anything that calls upon the Christian believer to receive as a revelation from God anything absurd, or wicked, or inconsistent with the intellectual or moral nature with which he has endowed us. The subject of the human intelligence to God is indeed absolute, but it is a subject to infaible wisdom and goodness. As it is impossible that God should contradict himself, so it is impossible that He should, by an external revelation, declare that to be true which by the laws of our nature He has rendered it impossible we should believe" [1:52]. d. The prerogative of reason is constantly recognized in Scripture: (1) prophets are to reject doctrines of the heathen for they could not be true. Why? They involved contradictions, absurdities; contradiction to our moral nature; inconsistency with known truths; (2) Moses taught that nothing was to be believed if it contradicted an earlier revelation from God; (3) Paul does same thing when he calls upon believers to pronounce even an angel accused, who should teach another gospel; (4) damnation of any man is just who calls upon people to believe that right is wrong or that people should do evil that good may come [1:52].

## 5. The ultimate ground of faith and knowledge is confidence in God:

"We can neither believe nor know anything unless we can confide in those laws of belief which God has implanted in our nature. If we can be required to believe what contradicts those laws, then the foundations are broken up. All distinction between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong, would disappear. All our ideas of God and virtue would be confounded, and we should become the victims of every adroit [skillful] deceiver, or minister of Satan, who, by lying words, should call upon us to believe a lie. We are to try the spirits. But how are to try them without a standard? and what other standard can there be, except the laws of our nature and the authenticated revelations of God" [1:52-53].

## 6. Reason must Judge of the Evidences of Revelation:

1. Faith involves assent and assent is conviction produced by evidence. Thus, faith without evidence is irrational or impossible; 2. Evidence must be appropriate to the nature of the truth believed. "Historical truth requires historical evidence; empirical truths the testimony of experience; mathematical truth, mathematical evidence; moral truth, moral evidence; and 'the things of the Spirit,' the demonstration of the Spirit. In many cases different kinds of evidence concur in the support of the same truth. That Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, for example, is sustained by evidence, historical, moral, and spiritual, so abundant that our Lord says of those who reject it, that the wrath of God abideth on them" [1:53]. 3. Evidence must be not only appropriate, but adequate to the well-constituted mind. (a) "From the nature of faith which is not a blind, irrational assent, but an intelligent reception of the truth on adequate grounds" [1:53]; (b) the Scriptures never demand faith except on the ground of adequate evidence. (e.g., John 15:24; Romans 2:14-16); (c) Bible regards unbelief as a sin, and the great sin for which men will be condemned (Eph. 3:18; Romans 10:14; John 3:19); (d) the biblical call to judge evidence as evidenced in commands that demand that believers consider, examine, and try the spirits. "God requires nothing irrational of his rational creatures. He does not require faith without knowledge, or faith in the invisible, or faith in the invisible, or faith equally opposed to superstition and Rationalism. The one is faith without appropriate evidence, the other refuses to believe what is does not understand, in despite of evidence which should command belief. The Christian, conscious of his imbecility as a creature, and his ignorance and blindness of a sinner, places himself before God, in the posture of a child, and receives as true everything which a God of infinite intellect and goodness declares to be worthy of confidence. And in thus submitting to be taught, he acts on the highest principles of reason" [1:55].

## What is the relationship between Philosophy & Revelation?

A. Understand that philosophy covers the whole domain of human intelligence. B. Philosophy & Theology occupy common ground: (1) both "assume to teach what is true concerning God, man, the world, and the relation in which God stands to his creatures" [1:56]; (2) Methods are different for "Philosophy seeks to attain knowledge by speculation and induction, or by the exercise of our intellectual faculties. Theology relies upon authority, receiving as truth whatever God in His word has revealed" [1:56]; (3) Both methods are legitimate for "Christians do not deny that our senses and reason are reliable informants, or that they enable us to arrive at certainty as to what lies within their sphere" [1:56]; (4) God is the author of both nature and Scripture; the facts cannot contradict one another. C. Philosophers and Theologians Should Strive for Unity these two great sources of knowledge must be consistent in their valid teachings; it is the duty of all parties to endeavor to exhibit that consistency" [1:56]. D. The Authority of Facts: "The relation between revelation and facts is one thing; and the relation between revelation and theories are another thing. Facts do not change their nature, or their authority, by the interpretation of Scripture, to suit the constantly changing interpretations of men. Theories, however, are subject to change. Theories are constantly changing representations of scientific men as to matters of fact" [1:57]. E. The Authority of the Bible higher than that of Philosophy. F. Offices of the Senses in Matters of Faith: (1) Our senses are reliable for the acquisition of knowledge for God designed us with senses; (2) "Confidence in our senses is, therefore, one form of confidence in God" [1:60]; (3) "All ground of certainty in matters either of faith or knowledge, is destroyed, if confidence in the laws of our nature be abandoned" [1:60]; (4) All elevation of supernatural revelation is addressed to the senses. Thus, "The senses are to be trusted only within their legitimate sphere. The eye may indeed deceive us when the corrections of vision are not present; but this does not prove that it is not to be trusted within its appropriate limits" [1:60].

Beginning with Pre-Socratic philosophy (e.g., Parmenides; Pythagoras) certain people began focusing on the structural aspects of reality to the growing exclusion of the physical, material aspects of reality and its phenomena. This focus is on that which is independent of experience (a priori), formal, and necessary became known as rationalism. In contrast, those who favor the idea that knowledge is acquired through the physical senses and study that which is materialistic and contingent (e.g., Heraclitus), tend to be described as empiricists. Empiricism contends that our sense perception is the locus of human knowledge. Therefore, reason, that is logical reasoning, is the foundation for knowledge. In other words, rationalism relies on logical reasoning. But notice both views presuppose the reliability of our human powers and physical sense perception. Moreover, both views stand in opposition to both authoritarianism and mysticism (e.g., reality is ineffable, transcendent, known by nonrational means). Additionally, we need to understand that (1) following Kant, reason is incompetent to prove any religious truth. Rather, the only foundation for religion is our moral consciousness; (2) The outward world is an unknown something; to show that there was no such world...there is no real distinction between the ego & non-ego; the subjective & objective; both are modes of the manifestation of the absolute; thus, all things are merged into one (Fichte & Shelling carried out these Kantian ideas); (3) Idealistic pantheism displaced rationalism became a subtle form of materialism The following chart is primarily adapted from Charles Hodge's analysis of rationalism (chapter III) in *Systematic Theology*; 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1:34-59 and is concerned about the the nature of rationalism, its major forms, and the proper role of reason in the life of the theological student.

## Definition of Rationalism

"By Rationalism is meant the systems of or theory which assigns undue authority to reason in matters of religion. By reason is not to be understood the Logos as revealed in man, as held by some of the Fathers, and by Cousin and other modern philosophers, nor the intuitional faculty as distinguished from the understanding or the discursive [rational] faculty. The word is taken in its ordinary sense for the cognitive faculty, that which perceives, compares, judges, and infers." 1:34

"Rationalism assumes that the human intelligence is the measure of all truth." 1:41

## 3 General Forms of Rationalism in Theology:

1. Deistic Rationalism;
2. Reason is the source & ground for all religious knowledge & conviction;
3. Dogmatic Rationalism.

"Philosophy, in its widest sense, being the conclusions of the human intelligence as to what is true, and the Bible being the declaration of God, as to what is true, it is plain that where the two contradict each other, philosophy must yield to revelation; man must yield to God. It has been admitted that revelation cannot contradict facts; that the Bible must be interpreted in accordance with what God has clearly made known in the constitution of our nature and in the outward world. But the great body of what passes for philosophy or science, is mere human speculation. In short, the Bible teaches certain doctrines concerning the nature of God and his relation to the world; concerning the origin, nature, and destiny of man; concerning the nature of virtue, the ground of moral obligation, human liberty and responsibility; what is the rule of duty, what is right and what is wrong in all our relations to God and to our fellow creatures. These are subjects on which philosophy undertakes to speculate and dogmatize; if in any case these speculations come into conflict with what is taught or necessarily implied in the Bible, they are thereby refuted, as by a *reductio ad absurdum*. And the disposition which refuses to give up these speculations in obedience to the teachings of the Bible, is inconsistent with Christianity" [1:58-59].

"God is the author of our nature and the maker of heaven and earth, therefore nothing which the laws of our nature or the facts of the external world prove to be true, can contradict the teaching of God's Word. Neither can the Scriptures contradict the truths of philosophy or science" [1:56].... Philosophers should not ignore the teachings of the Bible and theologians should not ignore the teachings of science. Much less should either class needlessly come into collision with the other. It is unreasonable and irreligious for philosophers to adopt and promulgate theories inconsistent with the facts of the Bible, when those theories are sustained by only plausible evidence, which does not command the assent of the body of scientific men themselves. On the other hand, it is unwise for theologians to insist on an interpretation of Scripture which brings it into collision with the [plain] facts of science. Both of these mistakes are often made "[e.g., Historical church resistance to Copernican theory of solar system].... let science take its course, assured that the Scriptures will accommodate themselves to all well-authenticated scientific facts in time to come, as they have in time past." [1:56-57].

## Deistic Rationalism:

1. RD denies either the possibility or the fact of supernatural revelation;  
2. RD affirms reason as the source & ground of all religious knowledge & conviction (pg. 34);  
3. RD Denies supernatural revelation on philosophical or moral grounds. Why? It is inconsistent with the nature of God, and with his relation to the world, to suppose that He interferes by His direct agency in the course of events:

(a) The true theory of the universe, according to their doctrine, is that God having created the world and endowed his creatures with their attributes and properties, He has done all that is consistent with his nature. He does not interfere by his immediate agency in the production of effects. These belong to the efficiency of second causes.

(b) Or if the metaphysical possibility of such intervention be admitted, it is nevertheless morally impossible, because it would imply imperfection in God. If his work needs his constant interference it must be imperfect, nay if imperfect, it must be that God is either deficient either in wisdom or power.

## Critique:

1. Contradicts the testimony of our moral nature in terms of our conscious relation to God. Hodge writes:

"The relation in which we stand to God, as that relation reveals itself in our consciousness, implies that we are constantly in the presence of a God who take cognizance of our acts, orders our circumstances, and interferes constantly for our correction or protection. He is not to us a God afar off, with whom we have no immediate concern; but a God who is not far from any one of us, in whom we live, move, and have our being, who numbers, the hairs of our head, and without notice a sparrow does not fall to the ground" [1:35-36].

1. Reason itself teaches God being sovereign ruler of creation, one who is both immanent and transcendent, and is able to commune with creation is more consistent with infinite perfection than of DR.

3. Cross-Cultural Natural, Moral Law (conscience & accountability).

4. The argument from Scripture: God, who is sovereign, is both everywhere active & present (1:36).

## Second Form of Rationalism:

1. Rationalism: Nothing can be rationally believed which is not understood; 2. Scriptures authenticate the truths of reason; 3. Nothing can be rationally believed which is not logically and reasonably understood; 4. This is a more common form of Rationalism; 5. Scriptures contain supernatural revelation; 6. The object of supernatural revelation is to make more generally known and authenticate for the masses the doctrines of natural religion (truths of reason); 7 These natural doctrines of religions are received by cultivated minds not on ground of authority, but rational evidence; 9. One is not bound to believe all that the teachings of the Bible; 10 The Bible contains a divine revelation but this revelation was made to fallible men, who are under no supernatural guidance in communicating the truths revealed; 11. Thus, the Scriptures have misapprehensions, inconclusive arguments, and accommodations to errors, superstitions, and popular beliefs; 12. Therefore, the office of reason sifts through these materials & "separate the wheat from the chaff:

"That which is wheat which reason apprehends in its own light to be true; that is to be rejected as chaff which reason cannot understand; and cannot prove to be true. That is, nothing is true to us which we do not see for ourselves to be true" 1:40.

For example: Why should one believe in the immortality of the soul? Rationalist replies: "The doctrine is reasonable; Why should one not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity? Rationalist replies, "Trinity is unreasonable."

## Critique:

1. Rationalism possesses a faulty foundation for the incomprehensible (that which may not understand) can be true (e.g., reproduction; brain). Rather, both the unknown and impossible can be believed. The assent to truth is founded on evidence with may be external and/or internal (e.g., testimony of the senses; testimony of others).

2. Insane presumption for the human creature to believe that human intelligence is the measure of all truth (e.g., if a child believes with implicit confidence what it cannot understand, on the testimony of a parent, surely man may believe what he cannot understand, on the testimony of God).

3. Rationalism destroys the distinction between faith and knowledge (which all men and all ages admit). Faith is assent to truth founded on testimony: "Crede quod non video" [I believe what I do not see]. Knowledge is assent founded on the direct or indirect, the intuitive or discursive [logical], apprehension of its object. If there can be no rational faith, if we are to receive as true only what we know and understand, the whole world is beggared. It loses all that sustains, beautifies, and ennobles life" [1:41].

4. Only the philosophers can be rationalists; the uneducated cannot comprehend on rational grounds on which even natural religion are to be received. But this stands in contrast to people of faith. Moreover, the rationalistic worldview has never controlled the historical creeds of all religion because it is established on the basis of the incomprehensible and the infinite. [1:41].

5. Rationalism is not existentially relevant nor viable; it doesn't meet us where we are; it is not worthwhile.

6. Faith implies knowledge. If we must understand in order to know, faith and knowledge are alike impossible. Rationalism leads to nihilism. "...we are surrounded on every side by the incomprehensible... The inscrutable, the incomprehensible, what we cannot understand... must therefore of necessity be rationally the object of faith.... We may rationally believe what we cannot understand. We may be assured of truths which are encompassed with objections which we cannot satisfactorily answer" 1:43.

## Dogmatic Rationalism:

1. Many of the truths of revelation are undiscoverable by human reason; 2. These truths of revelation are to be received on the basis of authority; 3. Platonic schools of thought and growing dominance of authority of the church into the Middle Ages; 4. But when these truths of revelation are able to be philosophically explained and justified, they are raised from the sphere of faith into that of knowledge [1:34]. 5. Faith is for the common people but knowledge is for those who are cultivated. Hodge writes:

"The objects of faith were the doctrinal statements of the Bible in the form in which they are presented. The ground of faith is simply the testimony of the Scriptures as the Word of God. The objects of knowledge were the speculative or philosophical ideas which underlie the doctrines of the Bible, and the ground on which those ideas or truths are received and incorporated in our system of knowledge, is their own inherent evidence. They are seen to be true by the light of reason. Faith is thus elevated into knowledge, and Christianity exalted into a philosophy [1:45].

## Critique:

## 1. This view is essentially rationalistic. Why?

"The Rationalist demands philosophical proof of the doctrines which he receives. He is not willing to believe on the simple authority of Scripture. He requires his reason to be satisfied by a demonstration of the truth independent of the Bible. This demand the Dogmatic admits to be reasonable, and he undertakes to furnish the required proof. In this essential point, therefore, in making the reception of Christian doctrine to rest on reason and not on authority, the Dogmatist and Rationalist are common ground. For although th former admits a supernatural revelation, and acknowledges that for the common people faith must rest on authority, yet he maintains that the mysteries of religion admit of rational or philosophical demonstration, and th such demonstration cultivated minds have a right to demand" [1:46].

## 2. Shifts faith from the foundation of divine testimony to rational demonstration:

"There is all the difference between a conviction founded on the well-authenticated testimony of God, and that founded on so-called philosophical demonstration, and that there is between God and man, the divine and human [1:46].

## 3. Dogmatism is destructive of faith since it is transmuting Christianity into a philosophy.

"In transmuting Christianity into a philosophy, its whole nature is changed and its power is lost. It takes its place as one of the numberless phases of human speculation, which in the history of human thought succeed each other as the waves of the sea, -- no one ever abides" [1:47].

## 4. Founded on an essentially false principle, namely, it assumes the competency of reason to judge of things entirely beyond its sphere.

"God has so constituted our nature, that we are authorized and necessitated to confide in the well-authenticated testimony of our senses, within their appropriate sphere. And in like manner, we are constrained to confide in the operation of our minds and in the conclusions to which they lead, within the sphere which God has assigned to human reason. But the senses cannot sit in judgment on rational truths. We cannot study logic with the microscope or scalpel, It is no less irrational to depend upon reason, or demand rational or philosophical demonstration for truths which become the objects of knowledge only as they are revealed. From the nature of the case the truths concerning the creation, the probation, and apostasy of man, the purpose and plan of redemption the person of Christ, the sate of the soul in the future world, the relation of God to his creatures, etc., not depending on general principles of reason, but in great measure on the purposes of an intelligent, personal Being, can be known only so far as He chooses to reveal them, and must be received simply on his authority" [1:47].

## 5. The Testimony of the Scriptures.